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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

MEMORANDUM: Historical Sketch of the Sino-Indian Dispute

1. The Sino-Indian border dispute owes even more to its past than do most frontier conflicts. Key factors underlying the dispute can be traced back through more than twelve years of differences between independent India and Communist China, through nearly a hundred years of competition between the imperial interests of Britain and China, and through previous centuries which saw military forays across the Himalayan barrier as early as 647 A.D. Indian pundits date their country's cultural claim to the Himalayas, which they regard as the fountainhead of Hindu civilization, as far back as 1500 B.C. The Chinese would have no trouble delving even farther back into their chronicles for supporting evidence.

2. Tibet historically was the arena of the Sino-Indian confrontation. As the British consolidated their hold on the subcontinent during the latter half of the 19th century, they began to look to the frontiers. The security policy that evolved cast Tibet and Afghanistan in the classic role of buffers against any threat from the Manchu and Czarist empires.

3. China's rulers always claimed dominion over Tibet, in varying degrees, but Chinese power has ebbed and flowed during the course of an ancient relationship. As the power of the Manchu dynasty began to crumble toward the end of the 19th century, Chinese overlordship in Tibet became no more than nominal. British leaders saw their opportunity and actively pursued a "forward policy" which ultimately extended India's sphere of influence as far as Lhasa. Peking's last-gasp attempts to reassert its control in Tibet collapsed with the fall of the Manchu regime and the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1912.

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4. The climax of British efforts to secure the Tibetan frontier came the following year when, through London's initiative, a tripartite conference was convened at Simla, a mountain resort in the Punjab Himalaya. British, Tibetan, and Chinese plenipotentiaries met to negotiate an agreement defining Tibet's status in relation to China and India. London hoped to get an agreement which would be the capstone of a series of treaties it had signed with the Himalayan border states and Tibet establishing British influence as dominant in the region.

5. The Simla conference is remembered now chiefly because of the McMahon Line, which was drawn on the conference map to define the boundary between India and Tibet from Bhutan east to what is now Burma. The line, named after the British delegation's leader, Sir Henry McMahon, was intended to follow the crest ridge of the Great Himalayan range as the natural Indo-Tibetan frontier. Since the crest in this northeast sector is broken in a number of places by river gorges and bisecting ranges and was still largely unexplored, the line drawn on the small-scale map gave only a rough indication of the actual boundary.

6. The chief concern of the Simla negotiators, however, was the proposed division of Tibet into two distinct zones, to be known as Inner and Outer Tibet. Under this scheme, Chinese authority was to be limited to those areas of Tibet bordering on China's southwestern provinces, while "outer" Tibet--including Lhasa and all of western Tibet--was to be granted full autonomy.

7. The Chinese Government refused to sign or ratify the treaty, although its representative had indicated agreement by initialing the draft convention at Simla. China's objections related to the proposed boundary between Inner and Outer Tibet only; the Chinese apparently did not then challenge the McMahon Line dividing India and Tibet. The Simla Convention was signed in July 1914 by the British and Tibetan representatives only; they had also signed--at Delhi in March--notes and a map delineating the McMahon Line in greater detail.

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8. Interest in the Tibetan problem dropped sharply with the outbreak of World War I a few weeks later. Despite the lack of final Chinese agreement, London formally declared that it considered the Simla accords to be binding on the governments concerned. During the period between the two world wars the Tibetan issue remained quiescent. Lhasa enjoyed a state of de facto independence from 1912 to 1950, and frontier security gave New Delhi little concern. The Japanese advance into China prompted the Nationalist government in 1933 and 1938 to try to reassert Chinese influence in Tibet, but these approaches were rebuffed by the Tibetan authorities.

9. Newly independent India's friendly feelings toward the Chinese Communists during their first year of rule received a sharp jolt when the People's Army of Liberation invaded Tibet in late 1950. Overnight the Himalayan frontier was again a major Indian problem. Nehru regards the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950-51 as the starting point of his present dispute with Peiping. In response to an alarmed Parliament, Nehru for the first time invoked the McMahon Line and the Himalayan crest range--"India's magnificent frontier"--as the definitive Sino-Indian border.

10. Although the government began taking limited steps to strengthen its security position in the frontier areas, New Delhi concentrated on diplomatic measures. Assurances were sought from Peiping during 1950-51 that Tibetan autonomy would be respected, and by 1952 new treaties were negotiated with Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal aimed at insuring Indian privacy in those strategic states. Nehru also pressed for an agreement with Peiping "regularizing" India's commercial and cultural relations with Tibet. Under a treaty signed in April 1954, incorporating the much-touted Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Panch Shila), India recognized Chinese sovereignty over "the Tibet region of China."

11. In 1953 the Chinese had begun to practice what has been called "cartographic aggression." Newly published Chinese maps appeared from time to time showing the presently disputed border territories as part of China. Indian protests were

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turned away with the explanation that the maps simply reproduced boundaries as shown on previous Nationalist maps, since Peiping did not wish to make any changes until it could survey and consult with China's neighbors. New Delhi also attempted to minimize the importance of these differences, despite a growing awareness among Indian officials that there was a major border dispute in the making.

12. These misgivings were deepened when the Indian Government learned in late 1957 that the Chinese had constructed a road cutting across the northeast corner of Indian-claimed Ladakh--the Aksai Chin area, a barren plateau never brought under Indian administration. A military team secretly sent in the spring of 1958 to reconnoiter the area was captured by a Chinese patrol in the first major border incident. The whole matter was kept under wraps by both sides for more than a year, until armed clashes during the fall of 1959 on the northeast frontier, as well as in Ladakh, brought the border issue dramatically into the open.

13. The 1959 clashes, which greatly intensified official and public antagonism between the two countries, were a consequence of Peiping's suppression of the Tibetan revolt during the spring of 1959. In the wake of the Dalai Lama's escape in March to India, where he was granted asylum, the Chinese built up their troop strength in Tibet and occupied the Himalayan passes in an effort both to stop the outward flow of refugees and to prevent any inward flow of arms and resistance fighters. New Delhi, alarmed by the increasing number of Chinese troops on its frontier, strengthened its units in the border areas, and skirmishes between patrols from each side of the undefined border occurred.

14. Tension subsided after several months, and a meeting between Nehru and Chou En-lai was arranged in April 1960. The chilly talks only confirmed the wide gulf separating the Indian and Chinese positions. It was agreed, however, to hold lower level discussions to compare documentation on the respective border claims. This process consumed more than six months, but failed to develop any practical basis for a negotiated solution.

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New Delhi continued to demand that certain preconditions--such as Chinese withdrawal from Indian-claimed territory--be fulfilled before serious negotiations were held, a position which Peiping still finds unacceptable.

15. Between 1959 and 1962, the Chinese gradually expanded the territory under their control in Ladakh, increasing the threat to strategic Indian positions. A new phase in the dispute opened in the spring of 1962 when the Indians began limited military operations in Ladakh to force the Chinese out of their forward posts. The Indians apparently hoped to push the Chinese back to the 1956 line, or at least to prevent any further advance.

16. The friction along the border resulting from this forward policy, coupled with similar challenges in a sector of the northeast frontier, precipitated the events which brought the Himalayan highlands before world attention this fall.

17. The claims and counterclaims underlying the border dispute never have had much relevance to the realities of the political and psychological situation in which New Delhi and Peiping have found themselves. Today, overtaken by the enormity of the new issues involved, they have even less. India rests its case in the northeast largely on the McMahon Line, and in Ladakh on "historical tradition" supported by various agreements between Kashmiri and Tibetan authorities dating back to 1684. The Chinese claim their line is "traditional" and maintain that Tibet never was independent and had no right to enter into agreements with a foreign power, thus rendering the Simla Convention and other treaties "illegal."

18. In the abstract, India has had the makings of a better case but has failed either to promote it effectively or to defend it on the ground; China, with a more dubious legal case, has promoted its "reasonable" position skillfully and demonstrated its power to enforce it. Questions involving the legality of the McMahon Line, the validity of such geographic factors as watershed and crest range,

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the ethnic and cultural distribution of the border peoples, and various "traditional" rights and customs, will figure importantly again only if the dispute reaches the conference table.

19. Nehru's prediction, repeated almost daily of late, that the Sino-Indian dispute will be a long and bitter one may be the first accurate forecast of relations between India and China he has made. Whether or not military action on a large scale is resumed, a high level of tension will persist for some time. The border dispute may in fact have a future nearly as long as its past.

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